

## *Mia's Story*



As I sit here writing Mia's story, she is lying right at my feet, actually lying on my feet, I have a 90 pound foot warmer! She is never far from my side.

Mia was born April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2004 and came into my husband and my lives on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 11 months after we had lost our 15 year old Dalmation to kidney failure. This little black ball of fuzz came from a litter of 9 puppies and was cute beyond words. We named her "Mia" which means "My Friend" in French. I had forgotten what a challenge training a puppy was, BUT it all came back quickly. I had a puppy that was growing by leaps and bounds, what a bundle of Energy and Joy she was, "Day and Night". Our darling girl, at 6 months old, was diagnosed with a heart murmur. A quick trip to VRCC and a cardiologist for an Echocardiogram indicated a moderated Sub aortic Stenosis. Her cardiologist at VRCC put her on heart medication and told us that there was hope in her

condition, we had caught it early enough, that with treatment, she may have a chance of growing out of the severity of her condition, but she would always have her heart problem. She sent us home and advised us to try and keep her as calm as possible for the next 6 months and we could only hope for improvements. She would see us in 6 months for another Echocardiogram. Now all of us know how hard it is to keep a 6 month old puppy calm...next to impossible, but we gave it our best effort.

I knew in my heart that Mia, our special needs child, had been given to me for a reason, so off to obedience classes we went. We live in Fairplay, 2 hours from Denver, but every Saturday morning we piled into the car and made the trip downhill to Denver for the classes. Mia loved the socialization with the other dogs and took to obedience quickly. At 10 months old, she graduated "Canine Good Citizen." The trainer that worked with us encouraged us to research becoming a Therapy Dog Team, as he and his Newfoundland were. Mia's tremendous ability to delight and soothe whomever she was around needed to be shared with as many people as possible.





At 1 year of age, we went back to VRCC to visit her cardiologist, and had another Echocardiogram. After the test, Mia's cardiologist told us she was seeing an improvement from her last exam. Because of her improvement and the medication there was a good possibility of her heart condition NOT to progress in severity, but a recheck in 1 year was necessary to make sure.

My research in wanting to become a Pet Therapy Team led me to Delta Society, which then led me onto Denver Pet Partners. In October, 2005, I went to the TEAM Training class. After completion of the class, I knew Mia and I were going in the right direction. I knew that I had the dedication and commitment, and Mia had the good temperament, skills and true love for people that was needed to make us a GREAT Team. We truly trusted each other.

Evaluation day came and I was scared to death, Mia was as calm as she could be, being only 18 months old and having what I call "only child syndrome" when it comes to being around other dogs, she does tend to get JUST a bit excited. By the grace of God we passed and received our certification on October 29, 2005. On our way back home to Fairplay that day, I had a 2 hour drive to reflect back on why Mia truly had come into my life, and was recovering from a heart condition that could have taken her from us at a very early age. I believe that there was a purpose in our lives, and now I truly understood what it meant for Mia and I to be partners. This was going to be the best life choice that I had ever made. I couldn't wait to get started, but Mia and I hadn't decided whether our work would be in the hospitals and nursing homes or with children. I knew that she would tell me in her own way.

My husband's work involved much travel at that time of our lives, so Mia and I would often tag along. Because of the travel, Mia and I were invited to visit my sister's Special Education classroom in Oklahoma. Prior to our visit, my sister and I began to talk of one of her new students, whom we will call "John". John had been diagnosed with autistim spectrum disorder. John had a monkey he had named "Monk" who would sit beside him daily to help him get through his classwork. I then shared with my sister and John that Mia also has a monkey who she sleeps with and even travels with, I then named Mia's monkey "Monk" also. I took a picture of Mia and her "Monk" and mailed it to my sister who then gave it to John. He was so taken



with Mia that he wanted to meet her, so...at John's request...Mia and I went to Oklahoma for our first classroom visit with children. John kept Mia's picture in his desk until our visit. Every time he would begin to miss her he would take out her picture and sit the picture beside him at his desk and leave his "Monk" on the shelf, not needing his "Monk" as often to help him with his classwork because he had Mia's picture. John has since made tremendous progress and no longer needs his "Monk", but Mia after a long days work with kiddos still needs hers, she is still VERY ATTACHED to her "Monk".

Our very first day in the classroom was a huge success, Mia took to the kids just as much if not more that the kids took to her, she loved them. While at the school we were also asked to visit the Multi-Handicapped classroom. We walked in and introduced ourselves, Mia led me over to one little boy, we will call "Jack". Jack was sitting quietly in his chair and began to pet Mia. This was a child who did nothing but scream, kick and pound his fists the whole class period, every day of school. He was now sitting calmly and petting Mia. We went on to visit each of the other children, and Jack got up to get his coat in preparation for lining up to go to lunch. As the other children lined up, Jack came to give Mia one last pet. The teacher asked the kids to tell Mia "thank-you" and of course this huge chorus of thank-you rang out. Jack leaned over to Mia and said "thank-you Mia". The teachers all went silent and looked at each other in amazement. They later told me that Jack had never talked, "Thank-you Mia" were Jacks very first words. I went back to my sister's classroom and told her of the experience. She and I both, with tears running down our faces, knew at that moment Mia was to work with children.

This is our story of how we began to volunteer at Fletcher Miller Special School in Jefferson County, a unique special education school for preschool -12. This school serves a variety of special needs children who are medically fragile and severely developmentally delayed. We also volunteer at Mental Health Center of Denver, doing group therapy with Elementary, (6-9 yrs), and Middle School (9-14 yrs) children.

I now understand what it means to be a Pet Therapy Team and what an honor it is to have Mia as my partner. Pet Therapy has allowed us to work together with special children, to touch their lives and hearts, if only for a moment, and hope that moment will be remembered by them forever.

Mia had her last visit to VRCC to see her cardiologist in June 2009. As expected her heart condition is very stable and does not appear to be progressing. I am so VERY BLESSED to have her in my life. Because of her so many wonderful things have come into my life...wonderful children, great friends and meaningful service to others through our volunteer work. Mia has a tremendous capacity to love children, as I do. Her skills are too precious not to share with others. Mia turned 5 in April, 2009 and is helping me fulfill my life's passion - to help me make a positive difference in the lives of others. Mia, my girl, this is to you..."I Love you".



*She is your friend, your partner, your defender, your dog. You are her life, her love, her leader. She will be yours, faithful and true, to the last beat of her heart. You owe it to her to be worthy of such devotion.*

*Anonymous*